

## **‘A bridge too far?’ The politics of Tasmanian school retention rates**

**Grant Rodwell**

*University of Tasmania, Australia*

During period 2011-2014, there was an increase in public discourse in Tasmania concerning post-secondary school retention rates. Perhaps this is not surprising, because the state has lingered for years in this regard with the poorest in the Commonwealth. The Liberal Party gained government on 15 March 2014, and immediately began enacting its policy of progressively providing post-secondary classes to high schools. Directed at highlighting an historical review and analysis applied to an educational policy topic, this paper features a research technique and topic which have received little attention in the research literature. Using historical research methodology, it details the politics of contested educational policy in respect to the provision of Tasmanian post-secondary classes for all Tasmanian secondary schools, as a measure to alleviate post-secondary school retention rates. Analysis is provided through the lens of Kingdon's *Agendas*, in this instance, the how and why educational policy development, and brought into public discourse, preparatory to the public voting on it at a state election. Through a case study of the political imperatives of educational policy, an analysis is provided for system-level policymakers and political leaders.

### **Introduction**

During 2011, there was an increase in public discourse in Tasmania concerning post-secondary school retention rates. Two other developments, however, appear to have accentuated this level of discourse. First, there was the fact that following the March 2010 state election the Liberal Party opposition adopted a policy of providing post-secondary classes for all Tasmanian secondary schools, as opposed to the Green-Labor Government *status quo* policy of only providing comprehensive post-secondary classes to its senior colleges in Tasmania's four major centres of Burnie, Devonport, Launceston and Hobart. And secondly, when the Liberal Party gained government, it had a strong mandate to implement its policy.

In Tasmania, generally compulsory school education is divided into primary (Preparatory to Year 6) and secondary (Years 7-10), with the non-compulsory Years 11 and 12 labeled as post-secondary. In 2010, Tasmania had only eight government schools offering education past Year 10. The state also has one of the poorest post-secondary school retention rates in the country. In some regional areas only 42 per cent of students finish post-secondary school (Muller, 2010). With an estimated resident population of 507,600 as at 30 June 2010 (ABS, 2010a) how do these post-secondary provisions connect with the state's school retention rate? The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2010b) reported "In August 2009, the apparent retention rate of full-time Tasmanian students from Year 10 to Year 12 was 64.1%, compared to 67.8% in 2005. The apparent retention rate for females in 2009 was 70.1% and 58.1% for males."

The ABS defines the apparent retention rate as being “the number of school students in a designated level/year of education expressed as a percentage of their respective cohort group in a base year” (ABS, 2012). This compared with a national average of 78% in 2010 (ABS, 2011).

Clearly, Tasmania compares very poorly nationally with respect to post-secondary school/college retention rates. Although, it should be recognised the retention data does not count the students undertaking vocational and technical and further education (TAFE) programs, only those students in post-secondary schools. TAFE and post-secondary school partnerships are a more common pathway after Year 10 in Tasmania, and it also does not account for the inter-state transfers out of Tasmania, where families are following work. Tasmania loses school-age students, while the big states are gaining students (Hay, 2015).

The Liberal Opposition went into the 2014 state election with a clearly and prominently stated policy of progressively establishing Year 11 and 12 classes in regional secondary schools. The state election was held on 15 March 2014 to elect all 25 members to the House of Assembly. The Liberals picked up five seats, Labor lost three, and the Greens lost two (Tasmanian Electoral Commission, n.d.). In a bid to improve post-secondary retention rates, regional secondary schools progressively would be provided with Years 11 and 12 classes. This was education policy through the ballot box.

Readers might wonder why various State Governments previously had not increased the number of schools offering comprehensive post-secondary education? How does politics interfere in the provision of comprehensive post-secondary education in Tasmania and policies related to the provision of strategies to improve post-secondary school retention rates?

### **The purpose of this paper**

Quite distinct from examining the *causes* of Tasmania's poor post-secondary retention rate, this paper seeks to explore the political imperatives underpinning these retention rates, especially in regard to placing the state's eight government schools offering education past Year 10 only in the major regional centres of Hobart, Launceston, Devonport and Burnie. What were the political imperatives by various Liberal and Labor state governments of driving the decisions not to provide comprehensive post-secondary education to Tasmania's other regional centres (e.g., Smithton, Wynyard, Penguin, Ulverstone, Scottsdale, Huonville, Queenstown and Deloraine)?

To this end, this paper first examines national political imperatives concerning retention rates. It then reflects on John Kingdon's (2003) *Public policy theory* in providing a theoretical understanding of the contested policies regarding the provision of post-secondary classes in all Tasmanian secondary schools in order to alleviate the state's poor post-secondary school retention rates. This paper then looks to the *who* of policy production, the visible participants, regarding these contested policies, and what they are contributing to the

policy discourse. Then an examination will move to the *how* of policy production in providing a historical background of Tasmanian post-secondary education. When discussing another aspect of the *how* of policy production, this paper examines briefly the politicisation of the Tasmanian Department of Education, a process some observers insist has been developing since the mid-1980s, and has been associated with of previous cases of failed system-wide policy development and implementation.

Consequently, there follows a brief examination of the *how* of policy production *vis-a-vis* the difficult politics of Tasmanian educational reform during the period 2000-2014. The Tasmanian political compromise of a hung parliament, and the accompanying intricacies of a Green-Labor alliance, reveals how policy development, is in fact, carefully managed for specific outcomes, while appearing on the surface to be chaotic. However, as the critical time of public decision-making nears, namely a state election, the key participants become more visible in the public policy discourse, thus generating the discourse towards policy enactment.

### **National concerns for post-secondary school retention rates**

School retention rates became a national concern during the mid-1980s, but arguably also dating back to at least 1973 when the Commonwealth began to fund aspects of Australian education in a comprehensive manner. Lingard (1991) coined the term ‘corporate federalism’ to describe the federal/ state/ territory relations of the Hawke-Keating years when the issue of school retention rates came to the fore. During this period massive influences included globalism and economic rationalism.

In respect to school retention rates, Logan, Bartlett and Freakley (1991, p. 1) confirmed “concerns about levels of participation and retention rates in education and training programs tend to derive from three sources”. Moreover,

In 1987, the Commonwealth outlined its programs to increase the level of participation in job-related education and training programs in the report *Skills for Australia*. This package included initiatives to increase the schools retention rate to Year 12 to 65% by 1992 and the policy has been extended in the Finn Report (1991) (Logan, Bartlett & Freakley, 1991, p. 1).

Obviously, governments have good reasons for investing so much in improving and sustaining strong post-secondary school retention rates, but how does this translate into policy in a state such as Tasmania, which had in 2014 only eight school/colleges offering comprehensive post-secondary courses? Next, this paper needs to consider a theory of the politics of policy development and enactment.

### **John Kingdon’s public policy theory**

In his Foreword to John Kingdon’s *Agendas, alternatives and public policy* (2nd ed.) James A. Thurber (2003) wrote:

Students often think policy making is random behaviour and that chaos theory best describes what happens in the agenda-setting process. Kingdon's model plays well into these initial biases, but introduces the reader to 'organised anarchy' as an explanation of how the policy process works. He focuses more on 'organised' than on 'anarchy' and characterizes the process by identifying three major policy streams in the [United States] federal government. They are problem, recognition — the formulation and refining of policy proposals — and politics. They operate independently of each other, participation is fluid, and they can be best understood by patterned events that are not dominated by one set of actors at any phase of the agenda-setting process (p. ix).

Thurber's last sentence in his Foreword to the second edition of *Agendas* underscores the importance of recognising contestation of the politics of policy development and implementation.

Kingdon (2003) asked "how are governmental problems set?" (p. 197). His Chapter Nine in *Agendas* is devoted to analysing this question in terms of problems, politics, and visible participants. This is central to the general thesis of this paper: *how* and *why* is it that Tasmanian governments, in face of strong national political pressures, had not extended the provision of schools offering post-secondary education beyond the existing eight schools/colleges in the state's capital of Hobart and its three major regional centres.

The first element of Kingdon's (2003) theory, that of problem recognition, is associated with Tasmania's dismal performance in national comparisons with retention rates of post-Year 10 students. Yet, as this paper will show, successive Tasmanian governments have had a history of not providing schools with comprehensive post-secondary provisions outside the capital and the three regional centres.

There is one central problem with using Kingdon's *Agendas* as a lens to analyse an educational policy in Tasmania, and that is it was written addressing issues in *federal* politics in the United States. What is its value at a *state* level in another country? Certainly, Brendan Kelly (2005) found it to be a useful lens in analysing educational policy development in two states in the United States. Closer to the theme of this paper, Hinz (2010) also has found Kingdon's *Agendas* a useful lens in analysing the politics of educational policy.

The elements of politics and visible participation are linked closely with power structures. For Gale (2003), this linkage was embedded in a necessary definition of 'policy'. Following Easton (1953) and Anderson, (1979), Gale (2003, p. 51) interpreted 'policy' as the 'authoritative allocation of values'. This is in regard to 'the *who* and the *how* of policy production'. In this respect, and following Prunty (1985), Gale also argued "the authoritative allocation of values draws our attention to the centrality of power and control in the concept of policy, and requires us to consider not only whose values are represented in policy, but also how these values have become institutionalised" (Prunty, 1985, p. 136, as cited in Gale, 2003, p. 51).

Gale (2003, 51) took this position because he sought to "expose the partiality (and, hence, fallacy) of rationality and consensus in policy production, or at least making room for such

disclosure". By drawing attention to the *who* of policy production, for Gale (2003, p. 52), following Lummis (1996), this enabled "the naming of values inherent in things that are seemingly technical (such as policy) and the foregrounding of a radical democracy" (which engages all people in public processes) as a legitimate basis for policy's authority'.

Clearly, policy development is not a rational process. And for Gale (2003), through "drawing attention to the *how* of policy production challenges not just the premise of rationality in policy making, but also how particular individuals and groups are involved in various contexts as policy makers" p. 52). So, the *who* and *how* of policy production for Gale (2003) 'are dialectically related' — two sides of the one coin.

Gale's (2003) study connected with Kingdon's (2003) work in that they both explain relations between the *who* and the *how* of policy production and the means by which these are connected to particular contexts of policy making. In earlier research, Gale (2001) proposed two conditions of critical policy historiography; specifically policy archaeology and policy genealogy. Regarding the first, he wrote: "Critical policy archaeology asks: (1) why are some items on the policy agenda (and not others)?; (2) why are some policy actors involved in the production of policy (and not others)? and (3) what are the conditions that regulate the patterns of interaction of those involved?" (Gale, 2001, pp. 387-388, as cited in Gale, 2003, p. 52).

On the other hand, Gale (2003) argued that policy genealogy is not convinced by analyses of policy production explained by 'bounded rationality' (Simon, 1960, as cited in Gale, 2003, p. 52) or 'incrementalism' achieved through 'partisan mutual adjustment' (Lindblom, 1959, as cited in Gale, 2003, p. 52). Policy genealogy, however, for Gale (2001) asks "(1) how policies change over time, but it also seeks to determine (2) how the rationality and consensus of policy production might be problematised and (3) how temporary alliances are formed and reformed around conflicting interests in the policy production process" (pp. 389-390).

These interests, particularly (2) and (3) of both policy archaeology and genealogy, involve discerning the nature of 'social actors' engagement with policy' (Gale, 2001, p. 52), and are central to a theoretical understanding of this present paper. This is so because as Tasmanians prepared for the 2014 election, they were faced with two clear choices regarding education policy: The Labor-Green policy of *status quo*, or the Liberal policy of change, and the provision of post-secondary classes for all Tasmanian secondary. Set against national imperative, the state's poor performance in post-secondary school retention rates was responsible for driving change, that of Kingdon's (2003) problem recognition. Next, however, this paper needs to consider briefly how some of the present policy participants have gained prominence in the public discourse concerning Tasmanian post-secondary education and post-secondary school retention rates.

### **The *who* of policy production: The visible participants**

The newly appointed University of Tasmania (UTAS) vice-chancellor, Peter Rathjen, spoke out on the university leading a community debate on "improving Tasmania's low

school retention rate and poor levels of achievement” (Paine, 2011). Paine (2011) also reported in the *Mercury*, “Rathjen said there was a clear desire by the community to talk openly about the issue” (Paine, 2011). “The statistics are very clear” Rathjen was reported as stating, “retention levels are still far too low and on some criteria the lowest in the country ... I can’t understand why the Northern Territory, with its massive disadvantage, in some criteria outperforms Tasmania” (Paine, 2011).

Liberal Party education spokesman, Michael Ferguson, quickly contributed to the public discourse, by declaring “The Liberals have a vision to reverse our low TCE [Tasmanian Certificate of Education] attainment rates by extending secondary schools to Year 12 over a decade and we’ve set aside a \$60 million fund to start delivering on this vision” (Paine, 2011).

At the same time the Australian Education Union — Tasmanian Branch (AEU) made clear its position on the public debate when Paine (2011) reported in the *Mercury* its ‘harsh’ criticism of Rathjen statement regarding the organisation of state’s system of post-secondary education. Moreover, in 2012 Terry Polglase, the state president of the AEU, was reported as stating his support for the existing system. The Catholic Education system in Tasmania had used the same organisational structure, and “the ACT [Australian Capital Territory] had the best retention rates and the same divided structure” (Paine, 2012). Polglase did not qualify his statement by drawing a socio-economic or historical comparisons between the ACT and Tasmania.

The State School Parents and Friends (TASSP&F), however, was at odds with the AEU. This organisation supported the provision of post-secondary classes in secondary schools outside the four main population centres (State School Parents and Friends Policy Document, August 2010, p. 3). Taking a more middle-of-the-road approach, however, the Tasmanian Major Employers Group’s (TMEG) chairman, Terry Long, said his organisation had no policy on the issue (Long, 2012).

What were the historical imperatives associated with these contrasting policies, as the state moved closer to the next election where the policy would be decided?

### **The *how* of policy production: Historical background of Tasmanian post-secondary education**

Any discussion of policy development and implementation aiming at ameliorating Tasmanian post-secondary retention rates needs to take into account the history of post-secondary educational provisions in Tasmania.

With the boom in post-war public education, by the mid-1950s the Tasmanian system of selective secondary education was passing into a system of comprehensive high schools and junior technical schools. But by the late 1950s, junior technical schools were being integrated into a system of comprehensive schools. Compulsory education existed for children aged five years to sixteen years. Most of these schools had matriculation, or Years 11 and 12 classes, or years of post-compulsory education. By the end of the 1950s,

enrolments in post-secondary education were vastly increasing. Alongside these high schools, was a system of technical colleges catering for students entering the various trades. In rural districts, the system of area school initiated in the 1930s continued to expand, catering for students from grades K-10 (Phillips, 1985, p. 324).

The demand for matriculation, or Years 11 and 12 classes, in the various comprehensive high schools continued to grow during the late 1950s and into the 1960s. However, with enrolments of only five or six students in some classes in schools, such as Queenstown High School and Smithton High School, the government was forced through financial imperatives to consider another system of post-secondary education. This was a system of post-secondary colleges in Tasmania's four major population centres. With considerable public opposition, but with support from the Tasmanian Teachers' Federation, now the AEU, beginning in 1962, Tasmania's system of matriculation colleges began using existing resources and infrastructure.

By the early 1970s, new colleges were being built at Rosny on Hobart's Eastern Shore, at Newstead in Launceston, in Devonport and in Burnie, and offering wide-ranging subjects, many of which were non-academic in meeting a wide range of community needs. Now there was a change in emphasis from matriculation to community colleges. These developments paralleled the changeover of the state-funded system of technical colleges to a more elaborate system of colleges of Technical and Further Education (TAFE), with increasing federal funding (Phillips, 1985, p. 326).

The development of the system of Tasmanian matriculation-cum-community colleges had its critics. Onetime Tasmanian secondary school principal, Michael Middleton wrote on the imbroglio surrounding the changes in Tasmanian post-secondary education during the late 1970s and early 1980s, at the same time criticising the general administrative separation of secondary and post-secondary education. Middleton (1982, pp. 97-8) highlighted the 'petty politics and power struggles' and the often blind eye to the increasing needs of young Tasmanians in the transition from school to work, in particular the separation of 'pre-16' and 'post-16' education, a move that "may prove to be Tasmania's worst blunder yet". But there were other policy failures to come, all underpinned by conflicting political imperatives.

### **The *who* and *how* of policy production: The politicisation of the Tasmanian Department of Education**

When discussing the *how* of policy production *vis-à-vis* post-secondary retention rates in Tasmania, more consideration needs to be given to the principal participants in the field. There first needs to be some understanding of how the Tasmanian educational bureaucrats and government politician respond to each other in regard to policy development and implementation.

The politicisation of government educational bureaucracies has long captured the attention of curriculum researchers. For example, with respect to the failed policy of the Tasmanian K-10 statewide Essential Learnings (ELs) curriculum Rodwell (2009b) wrote

that to understand the full nature of the changes in the Tasmania Department of Education, in this case in respect to curriculum policy, it is necessary to go back to the early 1980s in order to examine briefly how the department came to be so heavily politicised. However, space will not permit a detailed examination of that here.

This present paper contends the many difficulties confronting Tasmanian public education policy during the period 2000-2014 were underpinned by the politicisation of the bureaucracy of the Tasmanian Department of Education, and manifest in group-think and compliant bureaucratic behaviour.

### **The how of policy production: The difficult politics of Tasmanian educational reform (2000-2014)**

During the period 2000-2014 Tasmanian Labor governments oversaw three failed system-wide policy initiatives: the ELs curriculum; post-secondary restructuring (*Tasmania Tomorrow*); and the School Closure Bill of 2011 (Rodwell, 2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2010, 2011a, 2011b). A brief examination of these assists our understanding of what is occurring with the contested policies of the provision of post-secondary classes for all Tasmanian secondary schools as a driver for improved post-secondary school retention rates.

Beginning in 2000, the development and implementation of ELs ran smoothly until about eighteen months before the 2006 election, when its opponents began to organise themselves for a highly politicised campaign to have it abandoned. Following the 2006 election, with the incumbent Minister for Education only being returned in her seat of Franklin by a few preference votes, a new minister was appointed, and the ELs curriculum was ditched. Various factors have been attributed to the demise of ELs. These include: an Education Department bureaucracy lacking solid research support, with a demonstrated inability to advise the minister through coherent policy on emerging imperatives of system curriculum innovation; a lack of appreciation of the various interests of the many, and emerging, stakeholders; a complete failure to bring any influence over an increasingly partisan media, allowing it to drive public discourse; and compliant and non-critical educational bureaucrats in the Department of Education and by academics in the tertiary sector. The cost of the failed initiative has been estimated to be in the vicinity of \$80 million (Rodwell, 2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2010, 2011a, 2011b).

With David Bartlett, the new Minister of Education, in 2008 the returned Paul Lennon Labor Government embarked upon another statewide educational policy initiative — *Tasmania Tomorrow*. This was an attempt to improve Tasmania's performance in post-secondary retention rates. This involved a restructuring of Tasmania's post-secondary colleges and its Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institutions. The many opponents of *Tasmania Tomorrow* organised themselves in much the same way as did the opponents of ELs, gaining support from the Greens and the Liberals, and various other groups, principally the AEU, and increasingly held public demonstrations in the lead-up to the March 2010 state elections. A minority Labor government was returned, only surviving because of an accord with the Greens. *Tasmania Tomorrow* joined ELs in the rubbish bin of failed educational policy. The factors leading to its demise were much the



same as those which contributed to the demise of ELs. The cost of *Tasmania Tomorrow* has been estimated to be in the vicinity of \$70 million (Rodwell, 2010). Similarly, when the Tasmanian Hodgman Liberal Government sought in 2016 to lower by six months the mandatory school starting age, and it was blocked in the Upper House, many Tasmanians wanted to have the decision made at the state election due by October 2018 (*ABC News*, 2016).

### **The *how* of policy production: The Tasmanian political compromise in a hung Parliament**

With a statewide imbroglio surrounding the Bartlett Labor Government's policy on restructuring post-secondary education as an issue, the 20 March 2010 Tasmanian election 'went down to the wire' (*Mercury*, 2010, cited in Rodwell, 2011b). Antony Green, the national election commentator, reported how

the election will go down in history as having produced one of the most dramatic turnovers of House of Assembly membership. ... Both the governing Labor Party and opposition Liberal Party won 10 seats, but the Liberal Party had a lead of 2.1% in the total primary vote (Antony Green's Election Blog, 2010).

The Greens held the other five seats in the Lower House. It was a hung parliament, but on election night the Liberals, if prematurely, claimed victory. However, only days after the declaration of the polls, and Tasmanians waiting for Peter Underwood, the Governor of Tasmania, to announce a Hodgman Liberal government for the next four years, Nick McKim, the Green leader, put his support behind Labor. In a move that surprised many Tasmanians, Underwood asked David Bartlett, the incumbent Labor leader to form a new government, and in the words of a *Mercury* editorial, Labor was 'back in business' (*Mercury*, 2010).

Michael Field well understood the pressures on a minority government in Tasmania. He had been the premier of a previous Green-Labor minority government (1989-1992). Field addressed the national conference of the constitutional law and public policy organisation, the Samuel Griffith Society in Hobart on 27 August 2011, and decried the pressures on Tasmanian Labor politicians in the Lara Giddings Labor minority government. The current alliance with the Greens was proving difficult for many Labor members, who, for political reasons in their own electorates, were chaffing under the demands of government solidarity (Richards, 2011). Clearly, Labor members had to demonstrate publicly solidarity with the government, but at the same time there were massive pressures in their electorates for them to side with those people demonstrating to keep their local school open.

Crowley (2003) explored the role of minority governments in the Tasmanian context by reviewing the Labor-Green Accord (1989-92) and the Liberal-Green Alliance (1996-98) governments. She argued these Green-supported minority governments in Tasmania, "while short-lived and contentious, have had significant positive implications for public policy and the shaping of politics, and for not entirely precluding, in fact for encouraging, reform agendas" (p. 131). Her research concluded that these two earlier Tasmanian

minority governments “illustrate Kingdon’s notion of policy windows whereby problems, policies and politics come together at critical times, in times of crisis for instance, and facilitate fundamental policy innovation and change” (p. 131). While she “acknowledges the ideological strain of Greens partnering government”, she concluded “Green minority government offers significant reform opportunities” (p. 131). Through examining the legislative achievements of the two earlier Tasmanian Green minority governments, she concluded there is “empirical justification ... minority governments are far from passive and constrained in terms of governing capacity” (p. 131). Clearly, for the forthcoming 2014 state election, the Green-Labor Government, led by Giddings was inevitably soft on educational policy. Would it be its Achilles heel?

### **The *how* of policy production: The unique politics of equipping all Tasmanian secondary schools with senior secondary classes**

By 2012, there was considerable public discourse in Tasmania concerning the provision of post-secondary classes in schools outside the four major regional centres. The choices for Tasmanian voters were clear: Labor did not support these provisions; the Liberals did. It was an issue that would be decided by the next election.

Any discussion on Tasmanian regional politics should proceed from a recognition of the state’s peculiar nature of the multi-member Hare Clark electoral system. Here, with an approaching election, party loyalties usually dissipate as candidates from the same political party compete amongst each other for votes (for example, see Tasmanian Parliamentary Library, n.d.).

Often walking hand-in-hand with the Tasmanian Liberals (see, especially, Rodwell, 2011), following the completion of the 2011 school year, the *Mercury* in an editorial raised the issue of school retention in areas outside the four major centres. Here, the Hobart-based daily pointed to these towns, some of which already have been listed in this research, decrying the fact that generation-upon-generation of young people simply have had no experience of family members proceeding to post-secondary education, primarily because of the unavailability of courses in their local secondary school. At the core of the concern is the “quest for improved retention rates — regarded as the holy grail of educational outcomes” (*Mercury*, 2011). Moreover, the *Mercury* (2011, n.p.) editorial highlighted the disregard ‘many Tasmanian families’ had for school education. And what is the result of this neglect of providing post-secondary education in these areas? Surely, a breakdown of Tasmania’s social capital, in the words of the *Mercury* editorial: “Down that road lies the gravest dangers of social discord and exclusion” (*Mercury*, 2011, n.p.).

Several months after the publication of the December 2011 *Mercury* editorial, and following the release of concerning national comparisons of school retention rates by the Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority (ACARA) through the Tasmanian Department of Education (Dept of Education, 2012), the Tasmanian Liberal opposition was on its front foot regarding the Tasmanian Government’s policy on retention rates and provisions for secondary schools in areas outside the state’s four major centres. Despite a national report showing just fourteen per cent of boys living in remote areas finish Year

12, the Liberals had used the ACARA figures to call for Years 11 and 12 classes to be taught in all secondary schools. According to *ABC News* (2012, n.p.) Opposition spokesperson for Education, Jeremy Rockliff stated “the policy should apply to regional schools first ... we need an education system that increases retention rates not reduces them, as the cases has been over the course of the last decade when it comes to education in Tasmania”. The Acting Education, Minister Brian Wightman, responded, stating: “18 regional high schools already provide programs for Year 11 and 12 students” (*ABC News*, 2012).

Mike Middleton soon weighed into the developing public discourse following the release of the Tasmanian Department of Education (Dept of Education, 2012) report showing Tasmania’s retention for males in some areas as low as fourteen per cent. Middleton was now an education consultant advising schools nationally on retention measures. First, he criticised Tasmanian government secondary schools for dumbing down their pedagogy and curriculum. According to Gallasch (2012, n.p.), Middleton argued “there was no point trying to convince a year 10 student to go on if they were not introduced to the way of thought from a young age”. Sadly, “not all of them, but generally speaking the experiences and degree of academic rigour has kind of gone out of year 7 to 10 courses in government schools, in part because of the teaching” (Gallasch, 2012). The *Mercury* continued by reporting that Middleton urged the development of Years 11 and 12 courses at secondary schools outside the four major centres: “modern technology would allow this” (Gallasch, 2012, n.p.).

Through a Department of Education bureaucrat, Malcolm Wells, the Government responded to Middleton’s claim. Wells claimed “the Flexible Learning Network was a distance education option for Year 11s and 12s, while the Polytechnic also provided courses through a high school or training centre”. Moreover, for Wells “there was a strong working relationship involving colleges, high schools and primary schools to offer insight into future education opportunities” (Gallasch, 2012).

In the same Gallasch (2012) article, in endorsing his party’s education policy regarding post-secondary classes in secondary schools outside the four regional centres, Rockliff claimed “the low retention rate of students in remote areas was alarming and if in power the Liberals would extend high schools to Year 12 within a decade, starting in rural and regional areas where the retention rates are the lowest”. It was the Liberal policy to retain existing secondary colleges in the four regional centres (Gallasch, 2012).

The Flexible Learning Network to which Wells referred, in the absence of any empirical data, is a problematic issue: The program’s contribution to the state’s poor existing post-secondary school retention rates holds much promise. It is clear that its main thrust is vocational and educational training (VET), witness, for example, work done by the Australian Flexible Learning Framework (2004). While it could be contended Wells’ statement is a bureaucratic one, and perhaps, is more of an endorsement of the points made by Rodwell (2008) regarding the politicisation of the Department of Education, with its ‘group think’ and compliant bureaucratic behaviour. Yet, there is ample evidence to support the point that the unrolling of the national broadband network (NBN) will assist

significantly the improvement of Tasmanian post-secondary retention rates (Stack, Watson & Abbott-Chapman, 2013; Parliament of Australia, 2011; NBN, 2016).

Many observers of the policy debates in Tasmania during 2011 and 2012 may rightly be cynical of the *Mercury's* motives in conducting its Great Tassie Survey at the beginning of 2012, given its extremely partisan stance during the ELs imbroglio (Rodwell, 2011a). The survey, however, was noteworthy for accentuating the public discourse on the provision of post-secondary classes in all Tasmanian secondary schools as a means of ameliorating the post-secondary school retention rate. Relative to the survey, Rathjen "suggested the split system was an obvious factor in low retention rates, with the implication of finishing school at the end of year 10 rather than the interstate assumption of leaving at the end of year 12" (Paine, 2012). Rathjen is reported as adding: "I don't understand the Tasmanian system where students graduate at the end of Year 10 and then transfer [to another educational institution]" (Paine, 2012).

When asked by Paine (2012) to respond to these remarks, the Minister of Education and Training, Nick McKim, was reported as commenting: "It would be extraordinarily expensive to provide education to Year 12 in every high school in Tasmania" (Paine, 2012). He also made the point that "20 regional and rural schools would provide year 11 and 12 programs this year, and Flexible Learning offered distance education" (Paine, 2012). Moreover, "Tasmania's college system allows for a critical mass of students and teachers to support access to a rich curriculum provision" (Paine, 2012).

Paine (2012) then referred readers to the Tasmanian Liberals who had "already announced a policy to extend high schools to Year 12 within a decade" (Paine, 2012). Ferguson is reported as adding "it's no coincidence that Tasmania has the lowest Year 12 completion rates in the nation and we are the only state where high school does not go through to Year 12. Our students are being failed by a system which has entrenched the idea that high school finishes at Year 10" (Paine, 2012).

So the policy agenda was clearly set. Only a state election would decide whether or not Tasmanians would have post-secondary classes attached to all of its secondary schools. The Liberals won the 2014 State election with a massive majority, and the policy of the implementation of progressively providing post-secondary classes to all regional secondary schools began. Within weeks of the beginning of 2015 school year, Rockcliff announced: "This policy has exceeded all expectations. ... There's a 26 per cent increase in the numbers this year. Right across the state we are seeing increased enrolment in the schools. This is a policy that's working" (*ABC News*, 2015a, n.p.).

The principal of one Tasmanian regional secondary school came out in support of Rockcliff. Principal of the St Mary's district school, Bruce Campbell, said most of his extra enrolments were students who would have left school if they had to travel to college in Launceston. "These students would have left. Some parents have got family and friends in Launceston and they billet them there, he said. But there are children or students here who just don't have that support, so to be able to stay in their own community and do their 11 and 12 in their own community is huge" (*ABC News*, 2015a, n.p.).

With an element of bipartisanship, in February 2015, UTAS announced it would “open a new education research centre to tackle the state’s poor retention rates as part of a formal partnership with the Tasmanian Government” (*ABC News*, 2015b, n.p.). Named after the late governor, the Peter Underwood Centre for Educational Attainment would be funded by the State Government, the University of Tasmania and philanthropic donations. Run from UTAS, the centre would “investigate the best ways to keep children in school longer and improve teaching methods” (*ABC News*, 2015b, n.p.). Moreover, “the State Opposition suggested a similar partnership with the university in its budget reply last year in a bid to take the politics out of education” (*ABC News*, 2015b, n.p.). This bipartisanship suggests the policy of the provision of post-secondary classes for Tasmanian secondary schools had been established by 2015.

## Conclusions

When Kingdon (2003, p. 197) asked, “how are governmental problems set?”, in respect to the focus questions of this paper, quite clearly at one level the provision of post-secondary classes in Tasmanian secondary schools outside the four major centres was determined at the ballot box, as past educational policy has been in a number of contentious previous cases. As this paper has argued, however, there is much more to this process than the voting public simply voting for a particular policy. The ballot box is simply the driver of major educational policy development in Tasmania. But, in line with Kingdon’s (2003) theory, it is not chaotic or random, rather educational policy is ordered and managed beneath the ostensible chaotic overlay of political discourse as an election approaches.

In the Tasmanian context, understanding the *who* and the *how* of policy development is vitally important. Any analysis needs to be cognisant of Kingdon’s (2003) theory, which is supported by Gale’s (2001, 2003) critical policy archaeology theory, in explaining why are some items on the policy agenda, and not others?; why are some policy participants involved in the production of policy, and not others?; and what are the conditions that regulate the patterns of interaction of those involved? In attempting to answer these questions in the context of the contested policy of the provision of post-secondary class for all Tasmanian secondary schools to alleviate the state’s poor post-secondary school retention rates, this paper has demonstrated that we, *inter alia*, need to take into account the history of this in the state; the arguments accounting for the demonstrated politicisation of the Education Department bureaucracy; the political circumstances, including the state’s system of voting; the immediate past history of educational policy development in the state; and the manner in which key participants, including the media, claim a role in the public discourse.

All of this is far from being accidental and chaotic, but certainly it is driven by political imperatives. As pressure on Tasmanian governments to respond with policy to address the nation’s worst post-secondary school retention rates, its system of post-secondary schools and colleges was brought into question in the public discourse. Tasmanians waited for election day to understand their emerging educational policy in respect to the provision of post-secondary classes in their local high school or district high school.

## References

- ABC News* (2012). Govt defends school retention rates. *ABC News*, 11 January. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2012-01-11/govt-defends-retention-rates/3767580?section=tas>
- ABC News* (2015a). Tasmanian Government says regional school enrolments boosted by new education policy. *ABC News*, 3 February. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-02-02/tasmanian-government-tackles-poor-retention-rates/6064476>
- ABC News* (2015b). New research centre to tackle Tasmania's poor school retention rates. *ABC News*, 23 February. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-02-23/new-research-centre-to-tackle-tasmania-school-retention-rates/6218712>
- ABC News* (2016). Education Minister confident delay in lowering school age will be resolved before Tasmanian election (2016). *ABC News*, 22 October. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-10-22/delay-to-school-age-change-defended/7957116>
- ABS (2010a). *3235.0 - Population by Age and Sex, Regions of Australia, 2010*. <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Products/3235.0~2010~Main+Features~Tasmania?OpenDocument>
- ABS (2010b). *1307.6 - Tasmanian State and Regional Indicators, Dec 2010, Education*. <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/1307.6Main+Features9Dec+2010>
- ABS (2011). *4102.0 - Australian Social Trends, Mar 2011, Year 12 Attainment*. [viewed 24 April 2012]. <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4102.0Main+Features40Mar+2011>
- ABS (2012). *4125.0 - Gender Indicators, Australia, Jan 2012*. [viewed 12 August 2012]. <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4125.0Glossary2Jan%202012>
- AEC (1991). *Young people's participation in post-compulsory education and training* (The Finn Report), Canberra: AGPS. <http://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv%3A42925>
- Anderson, J. E. (1979). *Public policy making* (2nd ed). New York: Holt Rinehart & Winston.
- Antony Green's Election Blog (2010). Tasmanian Election — Final Summary of Results, 31 March [viewed 16 August 2011]. [http://blogs.abc.net.au/antonygreen/tasmanian\\_elections\\_and\\_politics/](http://blogs.abc.net.au/antonygreen/tasmanian_elections_and_politics/)
- Australian Flexible Learning Framework (2004). *Teacher ICT skills a key to online benefits for VET in schools*. Australian National Training Authority, <http://hdl.voced.edu.au/10707/41269>
- Crowley, K. (2003). Strained parliamentary relations: Green-supported minority government in Tasmania. *Australasian Parliamentary Review*, 17(2), pp. 55-71. <http://eprints.utas.edu.au/1578/>
- Dawkins, J. S. & Holding, A. C. (1987). *Skills for Australia*. Canberra: AGPS. <http://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv%3A14447>
- Department of Education (2012). *Tasmania's education performance report 2011: Government schools*. <https://www.education.tas.gov.au/documentcentre/Documents/Tasmanias-Education-Performance-Report-2011.pdf>
- Easton, D. (1953). *The political system*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

- Gale, T. (2001). Critical policy sociology: Historiography, archaeology and genealogy as methods of policy analysis. *Journal of Educational Policy*, 16(5), 379-393.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02680930110071002>
- Gale, T. (2003). Realising policy: The who and how of policy production. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 24(1), 51-65.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0159630030303026>
- Gallasch, R. (2012). Expert says retention starts at high school. *Examiner*, 11 January.
- Hay, I. (2015). Correspondence, Launceston, 2 April.
- Hinz, B. (2010). Australian federalism and school funding arrangements: An examination of competing models and recurrent critiques. In *Canadian Political Science Association Annual Conference*, Montreal, 1-3 June. <https://www.cpsa-acsp.ca/papers-2010/Hinz.pdf>
- Kelly, B. (2005). *John Kingdon's theory at the state level: A look at preschool for all in Illinois and California*. Georgetown University.  
<https://georgetown.app.box.com/s/uf8bvb3zlgm80d1k5tfq>
- Kingdon, J. W. (2003). *Agendas, alternatives and public policies* (2nd ed.) New York: Longmans.
- Lindblom, C. E. (1959). The science of "muddling through". *Public Administration Review*, 19(2), 79-88. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/973677>
- Lingard, B. (1991). Policy-making for Australian schooling: The new corporate federalism. *Journal of Education Policy*, 6(1), 85-90.  
<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/0268093910060106>
- Logan, L., Bartlett, L. & Freakley, M. (1991). Private sector initiatives and Commonwealth Government policy. In *Proceedings AARE Annual Conference, Gold Coast, November 1991*.  
<http://www.aare.edu.au/data/publications/1991/logal91305.pdf>
- Long, T. (2012). Tasmanian Major Employers Group, correspondence, 16 August.
- Lummis, C. (1996). *Radical democracy*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Mercury (2010). Back in business. Editorial, 9 April, p. 18.
- Mercury (2011). Schools path to future success. Editorial, 21 December.
- Middleton, M. (1982). *Marking time: Alternatives in Australian schooling*. Sydney: Methuen.
- Muller, G. (2010). Tasmanian school retention rates. *ABC Rural Bush Telegraph*, 26 March.  
<http://www.abc.net.au/site-archive/rural/telegraph/content/2010/s2857038.htm>
- MyPoliticians (n.d.). <http://osteccom.com/mypoliticians/dates.html> [viewed 16 June 2012, not found 21 Dec 2016].
- NBN (2016). Milestone: nbn rollout in Tasmania 58% complete. Press release 18 July.  
<http://www.nbnco.com.au/corporate-information/media-centre/media-releases/Milestone-nbn-rollout-in-Tasmania-58-complete.html>
- OECD (n.d.). *Better Life Index - Education*.  
<http://www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/topics/education>
- Paine, M. (2011). Uni push to fix schools woe. *Mercury*, 5 December.
- Paine, M. (2012). Backing for Year 12 push. *Mercury*, 29 February.
- Parliament of Australia (2011). *Broadening the debate*. House Standing Committee on Infrastructure and Communications.  
[http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/House\\_of\\_Representatives\\_committees?url=ic/nbn/report.htm](http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House_of_Representatives_committees?url=ic/nbn/report.htm)

- Phillips, D. (1985). *Making more adequate provisions: State education in Tasmania, 1839-1985*. A.B. Caudell, Hobart, Tas. Gov. Printer.
- Prunty, J. (1985). Signposts for a critical educational policy analysis. *Australian Journal of Education*, 29(2), 133-140.  
<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/000494418502900205>
- Richards, B. (2011). Majority may be minorities. *Sunday Tasmanian*, 28 August.
- Rodwell, G. (2009a). 'Death by a thousand cuts': A history of the Tasmanian Essential Learnings Curriculum (2000-06). PhD thesis, University of Tasmania.  
<http://eprints.utas.edu.au/21428/>
- Rodwell, G. (2009b). "Death by a thousand cuts": The failings of the Tasmanian Essential Learnings Curriculum (2000-06): The political dynamics. *Educational Research and Perspectives*, 36(2), 110-134. [http://www.erpjournals.net/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/ERP36-2\\_Rodwell-G.-2009.pdf](http://www.erpjournals.net/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/ERP36-2_Rodwell-G.-2009.pdf)
- Rodwell, G. (2010). The Tasmanian Essential Learnings Curriculum (2000-06): Some aspects of the ecology policy metaphor in analysing a failed statewide curriculum innovation. *Curriculum Perspectives*, 30(1), 40-52.
- Rodwell, G. (2011a). One newspaper's role in the demise of the Tasmanian Essential Learnings Curriculum: Adding new understandings to Cohen's moral panic theory in analyzing curriculum change. *Journal of Educational Change*, 12(4), 441-56.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10833-011-9163-0>
- Rodwell, G. (2011b). 'Half-pregnant with Bartlett's baby': Contested policies in Tasmanian post-secondary education: 2007-2010: Through the lens of Kingdon's *Agendas*. *Educational Research and Perspectives*, 38(1), 27-60. <http://www.erpjournals.net/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/ERP38-1.-Rodwell-G.-2011.-Half-pregnant-with-Bartlett's-baby.pdf>
- Rodwell, G. (2012). Developing and implementing educational policy in a hung parliament: The Tasmanian Green-Labor accord (2011), and Kingdon's *Agendas*. *Educational Research and Perspectives*, 39(1), 42-69. [http://www.erpjournals.net/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/13.08.12\\_ERP39\\_Rodwell\\_2012\\_Tasmanian-Government-Policies-of-School-Closures.pdf](http://www.erpjournals.net/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/13.08.12_ERP39_Rodwell_2012_Tasmanian-Government-Policies-of-School-Closures.pdf)
- Stack, S., Watson, J. & Abbott-Chapman, J. (2013). The national broadband network and the challenges of creating connectivity in education: The case of Tasmania. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, 29(2), 283-302.  
<http://ajet.org.au/index.php/AJET/article/viewFile/122/57>
- Tasmanian Electoral Commission (n.d.)  
<http://www.tec.tas.gov.au/StateElection/Results.html> [viewed 12 Mar 2015; not found 21 Dec 2016, try  
<https://www.tec.tas.gov.au/Info/Publications/ElectionReports/Report%20on%20Parliamentary%20elections%202011%20to%202014.pdf>]
- Tasmanian Parliamentary Library (n.d.). House of Assembly elections.  
<http://www.parliament.tas.gov.au/tpl/Backg/HAElections.htm>
- The State School Parents and Friends Policy Document (2010).  
<http://www.parentsandfriendstasmania.asn.au/> [viewed 12 Aug 2012, site not found 21 Dec 2016].
- Thurber, J. A. (2003). Introduction. In J. W. Kingdon, *Agendas, alternatives, and public policies* (2nd ed.). New York: Longmans.



Trading Economics (n.d.). Australia unemployment rate.

<http://www.tradingeconomics.com/australia/unemployment-rate>

Williams, T. (1987). *Participation in education*. Melbourne: ACER.

**Dr Grant Rodwell** is an Adjunct in the Faculty of Education, University of Tasmania. Grant has completed his fifth PhD, and his third at the University of Tasmania. He publishes on a range of topics: Commonwealth involvement in Australian school education; history of school education; and history of risk society thinking impacting school education. Recently, he has completed a book on the history of the impact of moral panics on school education (Routledge).  
Email: [grant.rodwell@utas.edu.au](mailto:grant.rodwell@utas.edu.au)

**Please cite as:** Rodwell, G. (2017). 'A bridge too far?' The politics of Tasmanian school retention rates. *Issues in Educational Research*, 27(1), 151-167.  
<http://www.iier.org.au/iier27/rodwell.pdf>